

Market goes organic as green revolution grows

What's all the fuss about organics and should we really care?

Judging by the number of people who attended the natural and organic exhibition at the convention centre earlier this year, the green revolution is growing.

"Up until 1950 most of the world's agricultural lands were organic. Then the chemical industry kicked into gear.

"Since then more than 100 000 chemicals have been introduced into our food and agricultural sectors," says exhibition director David Wolstenholme of Rondebosch.

More organic products are appearing on retailers' shelves - from organic lamb to free-range milk. Organics is far more than a tastier lettuce or a redder tomato, it's about health, says David.

Organics is about getting the soil back to its original composition without using harmful chemicals.

"Healthy soil = healthy plant = healthy human. It's as simple as that. What we put into our bodies should be important to everyone. We all want to look and feel better," says David.

Organic foods are monitored and tested by independent certifiers before they can claim to be "certified organic".

The organic certification on the packaging is your assurance that no harmful chemicals or ingredients have been used in the growing or processing of the food that you will buy.

The European Union (EU) has banned the use of oil-based chemicals in all cosmetics and make-up. This has helped to boost the natural

and organic cosmetic industry, which is growing at an astounding 35% a year against conventional cosmetics, which have declined to a growth rate of only 2% a year.

Now companies are using essential oils that are organically grown, David says.

Organic products include processed foods, wine and beer, cosmetics, body care, natural medicines, textiles, cleaning materials and pet foods.

Textiles are also being produced from organically grown cotton, hemp, soy, flax and bamboo.

Soy is particularly interesting. The fibre comes from the stem of the soy plant.

In South Africa, over 200 000 hectares of soy are grown every year.

"Currently we plough these stems back into the soil because we are using GM seed and chemical fertilisers.

"Other countries are cultivating organic soy, selling the oil seed, which can be processed into edible oils, soy milk and many other applications.

The cake that is a by-product created from crushing the oil seed is sold as organic cattle feed.

Finally the stems are processed into fibre for textiles - giving three income streams from one plant to those farmers."

Once soy-based textiles have been processed, the fibre has a feel that falls between a cotton and silk.

There is almost no product category that is not going organic.

You can get organic golf shoes, car seats, all types of clothing, chocolate and nougat, vodka and brandy.

Even hotels are in on it - from organic cotton sheets and bamboo towels to organic coffee, tea, milk and meat.

Free-range milk comes from cows that are not fed growth hormones and feed lots that are not from GM feedstock.

"It's a step in the right direction - but is not certified or monitored.

So it is up to the farmer to be honest," says David.

The alternative is too ghastly to contemplate, as one infamous politician pointed out.

This year the EU banned all pineapples from the Eastern Cape because farmers used contaminated fertilisers from China.

Perhaps you ate one which contained cadmium, one of the contaminants.

However, every organic product must be certified - by independent certifying bodies like SGS, Soil Association and Eco-cert.

These international bodies monitor each producer monthly and then test each produce or production batch before certifying it.

Every organic product must have the certifier's logo on the package.

At present, there is no organic standard in South Africa but it may be introduced next year.

"Then, based on that, we will have local 'official' bodies that can monitor produce and processed foods.

For now we have to rely on international institutions and our retailers who monitor and test their own suppliers."

However, it is different overseas. America prefers SGS, Europe prefers Eco-cert and England the Soil Association.

So when an importer buys organic from South Africa they will specify which certification body should be used.

This is a huge burden on producers, especially when they are selling to more than one market and have to be certified a number of times.

What do you think about organics or GM seed? Email brian.joss@int.co.za with your comments.

● It's not often that I promote a product in Off My Trolley. But this one is unusual and ties in with the green revolution.

It is an ergonomically designed accessory, especially for laptops. Ergo-tilt relieves postural stress and increases efficiency by tilting your laptop from a flat position.

It is light and folds flat for laptop carry-cases.

The packaging is made from recycled fibres and the plastic from which the Ergo-tilt it made is recyclable.

It was designed by a South African grandfather, Herb Ostroff, and has been in the stores for a few months. It is now being sold in Canada and next year it will be marketed in America.

● If you have any ideas for making cheap and cheerful decorations for the Christmas tree or, if you have a special recipe, email the details to brian.joss@int.co.za with your name and address.

Brian Joss



Off My Trolley